

What was life like for children in Victorian London?

Victorian children lived very different lives to children today. Poor children often had to work to earn money for their family. As a result, many could not go to school.

London's population grew rapidly during the 19th century. This led to major problems with overcrowding and poverty. Disease and early death were common for both rich and poor people.

Victorian children did not have as many toys and clothes as children do today and many of them were homemade.

What work did Victorian children do?

Poor children often had to work instead of going to school. Many worked with their parents at home or in workshops, making matchboxes or sewing. Children could also earn a bit of money as chimney-sweeps, messengers or crossing sweepers like the boy in this picture.

Crossing the street in the 19th century could be dirty and dangerous. London's streets were dirty because horses were used as a method of transport and they left a lot of horse muck behind. Sweepers cleared the way for rich people to cross the road without dirtying their clothes.

This painting, like others by Frith, was painted from scenes he had seen himself.



The Crossing Sweeper
by William Frith, 1858

In the 1850s one in nine girls over the age of 10 worked as domestic servants for wealthy homes.

Did Victorian children go to school?



School attendance medal, 1896

Sending children to school could mean the family losing the money they could earn if they worked. Many poor children therefore did not go to school very often. Medals like this one were given to encourage children to go to school.

This medal was given to William J. Seaman for arriving on time every day the school opened that year. He went to a School Board school. These were set up in the 1870s to provide a basic schooling and were paid for from local rates.

Young richer children were often taught at home by a private tutor. Boys then went to boarding schools. Middle class children went to grammar schools or private academies.

How healthy were Victorian children?



Mourning card, 1899

Many Londoners died from illnesses such as cholera, measles and scarlet fever. Babies in over-crowded and damp housing were the most at risk from diarrhoea and tuberculosis. Even those in rich families died because of poor medical knowledge.

This mourning card shows that three children in the same family died between 1897 and 1899. They were all under three years old.

Parents could also die at a young age so London had many orphans, rich and poor. Orphans who could not find a place in an orphanage sometimes had to live on the streets or in workhouses. Workhouses provided food and shelter in return for hard, unpleasant work. Conditions were very harsh and people would only go to workhouses as a last resort.

In London slums, more than half of all babies died before their 1st birthday.

What clothes did Victorian children wear?

This photo shows a boy walking from the pawnbrokers (shop that lends money in return for personal items) carrying some clothes in a parcel. It was common for poor families to pawn their Sunday best clothes on a Monday morning. They would then collect the clothes on a Saturday, which was payday, so they could wear them again on Sunday. Poorer children often wore patched and mended clothes that had been bought second-hand or passed down through the family.



Photograph of young boy returning from pawnbrokers, 1890–1910

Boots and shoes were the most expensive items and some children were forced to go barefoot, even in winter.

What toys did Victorian children play with?

Poor children often made their own toys such as rag balls or, if they were lucky, bought cheap penny toys. Wealthier children played with dolls with wax or china faces, toy soldiers and train sets.

The Museum of London has a collection of tinsplate toys that would have been bought from street traders for a penny. Poor children would sell these on the street to make money. The toys were often given to children in their Christmas stockings.

Toys were often given in order to teach children something. This shoe black doll was probably sold to raise funds to protect poor children who worked as shoe blacks. Shoe blacks were children who cleaned boots and shoes for a living. Dolls like this might have been bought by richer families to teach children about the life of poorer children.

After church on Sundays, children were often expected to play with toys connected to the Bible, such as a model of Noah's Ark.



Doll dressed in the uniform of the London Shoe Black Brigade, 1860–1880

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections.

The Virtual Victorian Walk (a virtual version of our reconstructed Victorian Walk at the Museum of London)

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/victorianwalk.

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank.

Visit the Museum

Galleries of interest to this topic:

Expanding City: 1666–1850 at the Museum of London

People's City: 1850s–1940 at the Museum of London

Sailortown at the Museum of London Docklands